

Text: Ephesians 6: 10-20  
Title: Stand  
Date: 08.26.18  
Roger Allen Nelson

The speaker leaned forward and with a steely stare said, “Are you in the battle? There are no sidelines in spiritual warfare. There is no neutral. There is no Switzerland. You are either in the battle or you’re a casualty.”

I gulped and looked around the room as other nodded in agreement. I didn’t know what to do. I was reminded that when a young woman came to see me to ask about spiritual warfare that I gave her the name of a good therapist....

The call to spiritual warfare makes me sweat and squirm.  
It shines a light on my meager prayer life.  
It reminds me that I don’t frame life that way.  
I’m a casualty in a cosmic spiritual conflict.  
Maybe you are too?

Dear friends, it’s easy to dismiss that kind of language as overheated antiquated spiritual rhetoric. And yet, the biblical story can be read as a struggle between good and evil, light and dark, life and death. Both testaments include images of warfare as creation falls under the curse of sin and God fights for its salvation. From the garden in Genesis to the city in Revelation, scripture includes pictures of God and Satan doing battle for the eternal destiny of humanity and the created order.

So, while it is not my favorite language or emphasis I’m hard pressed to wiggle my way out of it. While I don’t like the militant imagery of “prayer warriors” and I’m repelled by the rallying cry of those who fear the wiles of environmentalists, public educators, and progressives of every stripe, it is a biblical motif that I can’t shrug off. As one who has enough trouble with his own demons, I rarely worry about those that lurk in the rarified air of the spirit. Nevertheless, spiritual warfare is a scriptural thread that I can’t pull out and ignore.

Therefore, what if we come at it this way?

There is an evil loosed in this world.

It is something other than just ignorance or selfishness or a function of the will.  
Evil is in the human heart without regard for class, creed, culture, or color. Evil is in creation itself; there is a toxicity that mars and mangles and leads to death.  
There is an evil loosed in this world that is not conquered by political philosophy, economic system, educational accomplishment, or religious impulse. There is an evil loosed in this world for which humanity is culpable and of which humanity is victim. There is an evil loosed in this world that is as unnerving as today’s news and as immediate as our own inclinations. Evil is in mind and stuff and spirit.  
There is not a square inch of creation that isn’t stained by the effects of evil.

That is not to say that creation isn't good.  
That is not to say that there aren't experiences of beauty and babies.  
That is not to say that love doesn't bloom.  
That is not to say that mercy and selflessness don't exist.  
But, it is to confess that the hell of this world is not to be trifled with or trivialized.  
There is an evil loosed in this world.

So, when Paul, in prison chains, implores the early church to put on the power of God, he is not taking poetic license, he is emphatic and instructive:

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil...*

And we would dutifully arm ourselves for the battle that is raging all around us.  
We would gird up our loins, grab shield, helmet, and sword, and wade in.  
Don't be left on the sidelines....

The victory goes to the valiant.  
The reward goes to the righteous.  
The fight goes to the faithful.  
Onward, Christian soldiers?

Dear friends, while that might be a stirring call to action what if misses the good news?  
What if that battle cry gives the gospel short shrift?  
What if the call to spiritual warfare forsakes the gospel?

Consider.....

In the first chapters of Ephesians Paul writes that God exerted his power in Christ....

*when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, and power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything....*

As absurd as it sounds, evil is already defeated.

The war is won. God in Christ – in cradle, cross, and resurrection – has destroyed the power of evil. It's a done deal. Paul's claim is that as everything has been placed under Christ, evil holds no final sway. It has been swallowed up in the self-giving-suffering-love of God. The first three chapters of Ephesians assert that God in Christ has wrought unity and peace and reconciliation and destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. The good news is that ultimately love wins.

Therefore, the instruction to don the full armor of God is not to a battle that hangs in the balance ~ awaiting our participation as if we are the tipping point ~ for evil is already defeated in Christ. Thanks be to God.

In the “The Brothers Karamazov,” Ivan makes a case that there is no God because of the innocent suffering of children. Evil is too powerful for there to be adequate redemption. He contends that the Christian is expected to believe that parallel lines, which never meet on earth, will meet in infinity and that even the suffering of innocents will be redeemed. As Ivan puts it, the Christian must believe that:

*Suffering will be healed and made up for... at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all crimes of humanity, of all the blood they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive, but to justify all that has happened to man.*

That is hard to fathom, hard to follow, hard to swallow. But! But as God defeats all evil in Christ, and all creation is redeemed, then there is

nothing to fear,  
nothing to run from,  
nothing to despair.

That is not to say that every vestige of evil is eradicated. There are horrific and abhorrent expressions of evil in this world that can still crush us. Sin and brokenness still do their worst. But, the remarkable hope of the gospel is that God in Christ bore and has defeated every evil loosed in this world.

And therefore, Paul's instruction is not a call to battle.

It is not the sounding of attack.

It is the command to stand....

Four times in these few verse Paul uses some form of the word to stand.

Maybe that's just semantics, except that many scholars note that all of the armor Paul lists is defensive ~ save the Bible as a sword. And maybe I like the call to stand rather than the cry to warfare because I'm conflict avoidant and a “lover not a fighter” (to quote Michael Jackson).

But, could it be that in the face of evil, in this time between what is already done and what is yet to come, we are called to stand in the deep and abiding assurance that love wins? And then live life out of that faith....

Quite frankly that way of reading this text calls forth in me (and maybe in you?) a desire to have my life count for something. Given all the callings in this world, what is it that I stand for? Who do I stand with? If you don't stand for something you'll fall for anything, so what is it that you stand for?

Again, let me suggest that the first chapters of Ephesians are instructive.  
Paul writes that the work of God in Christ is one of unity, peace, and reconciliation.

So, dear people of God, may we stand where God is at work.

May we, stand with the poor.

Stand with the victims of injustice.

Stand for reconciliation.

Stand for peace.

Stand with the outsider, the broken, the cast aside.

Stand for a gospel of grace.

Stand for mercy.

Stand for love.

Stand in the full armor of God.

And how do we do that?

One way is at the table. In the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine we stand with Christ in the mystery of what Frederick Buechner call “the magnificent defeat.” Jesus defeats the powers of evil, not through drawn swords and rippled muscles, but through death, through non-violence, through trust in a love that is stronger than hate....

In communion (and in baptism) we stand with Christ in that mystery. At the table of broken body and spilled blood we stand in the trust that God in Christ has defeated evil and overcome death.

Let us stand together in that deep trust.

Let us live out of that great faith.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.